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THE TEACHING OF SPANISH FROM THE LATIN-AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW

In January of 1916 the Second Pan American Scientific Congress, composed of representative men from all the countries of this hemisphere, men with reputations as writers and thinkers, adopted the following resolution: "That Spanish be taught more generally in the schools, colleges, and universities of the United States, . . . and that [it] be taught from the point of view of [Latin-] American life, literature, history, and social institutions."

The first part of this resolution—that Spanish be taught more generally—constitutes an appeal to our school-boards and college-presidents, for they are responsible for the amount of Spanish in this country. Its rapid and wide-spread increase is a proof that they are responding. But the second part, that it be taught from the Latin-American point of view, is an appeal to us, the teachers of Spanish, for we alone can determine the way in which it is to be taught. It is with this latter part of the resolution that the following pages are concerned.

That we should exert every effort to respond to this appeal becomes obvious, in the opinion of the present writer, as soon as we realize what led the members of the Congress to make it. In their own explanation, printed on page 81 of the "Final Act of Second Pan American Scientific Congress" (1916), they contend that "an understanding based upon an appreciation of and a respect for the intellectual life and the achievements of the Americas would be the great bond of sympathy between the peoples of all the American countries."

With this contention almost everyone would agree—theoretically. We all of us believe, at least theoretically, in bonds of sympathy, and brotherly love, and the Golden Rule. But the argument of the Pan American Congress may be made more compelling by stating it in a more matter-of-fact way, and from a

more selfish standpoint. The fact is that the United States needs Latin America. Not only the commercial, but also the political future of this country, perhaps its very existence as a nation, will depend on the success of Pan Americanism. Our statesmen and our financiers have for some time realized this. They have been trying to make Pan Americanism more than a phrase. But the task is hard. They cannot accomplish it without the aid of public opinion. Back of their enthusiasm for Latin America must stand public enthusiasm. And that enthusiasm can come only as a result of better acquaintance. If our younger generation becomes acquainted with Latin America, it will help form a public opinion favorable to Latin America, which will materially aid in the accomplishment of the plans which our leaders are now trying in vain to accomplish. It is true that our students might better acquire the needful knowledge by taking special and separate courses in Latin-American geography, history, and social institutions, but it will be a long time before many of our schools and colleges can afford to offer such courses. Meanwhile, the majority of our boys and girls are going to study Spanish, which may be made to include somewhat of all these things. The study of Spanish may be made the vehicle for that acquaintance with Latin America which the nation so urgently needs. That, with all definiteness, is why we teachers of Spanish should respond to the appeal of the Congress. There is a national need of the Latin-American point of view.

To say that we ought to respond to the appeal is one thing; to say how we may do so is another. It is not a simple problem. On the contrary, it is beset with all sorts of difficulties and doubts. There are many of us who are groping for ways and means. That is all we can do for the time being. We can only propose plans, and try them, hoping that out of all our projects and experiments will come the definitive solution. The rest of this article, therefore, is to be looked upon as merely a tentative contribution to the question.

Before attempting to say what the phrase 'to teach Spanish from the Latin-American point of view' means, it may be well to say what it does not mean.

It does not mean Spanish-American pronunciation. Somehow or other the idea has become prevalent that the Latin-American

point of view necessarily involves talking Spanish like a composite Mexican-Peruvian-Argentinian—not to speak of the other fifteen Spanish-American nationalities. This is enough to damn the Latin-American movement in the eyes of many, for there are many who consider any deviation from Castilian pronunciation to be the unpardonable sin of Spanish teaching. But neither the resolution of the Pan American Congress, nor the published explanation of that resolution, contains a word about how we should pronounce. It is recommended that we should teach from the point of view of Latin-American “life, literature, history, and social institutions.” The word *pronunciation* is not there. Neither, for that matter, is the word *grammar*. Let not Castilian purists be afraid. They may continue to use the ‘First Book’ they have always used, without changing a single rule from one cover of it to the other, and yet adopt the Latin-American point of view in their teaching.

Nor does the new point of view mean commercial Spanish. It is of course true that many of our boys, and girls too, for that matter, will some day have to use Spanish for business purposes, and it is therefore natural and necessary to introduce some training in commercial correspondence into all our Spanish courses. But this does not mean that the Latin-American point of view is a commercial point of view. The published explanation of the resolution of the Congress (Final Act, page 81) is explicit as to this point: “It is to be borne in mind that the word commerce does not figure in this article. The Congress looked beyond material interests to the things of the spirit.” That is surely clear enough. Our instruction in Spanish is to be given not only to future exporters and importers; it is to be given, we hope, to all young Americans, whether they are to be connected with the foreign trade or not. We Spanish teachers are not asked to make business men and women of our students—we are asked to make Pan Americans of them.

With these two misconceptions out of the way, I may now proceed to say exactly what is meant by the Latin-American point of view in the teaching of Spanish. It will be necessary, however, to discuss elementary and advanced courses separately, for the phrase has a very different meaning as applied to the one kind of work and to the other.

I should say, parenthetically, that by 'elementary courses' I mean those in which the main object is the teaching of the language as such; an 'advanced course' presupposes a knowledge of the language, and deals solely with some phase or period of its literature. On the basis of such a classification, most first and second year College courses, and most High School courses of whatever duration, are elementary; most College courses intended to follow two years of study are advanced.

In advanced courses, to teach from the Latin-American point of view means, obviously, to treat Latin-American literature in the same way, *mutatis mutandis*, in which we have long treated Castilian literature, or any literature. It is impossible to give a good course in the literature of any country without connecting it with the "life, history, and social institutions" of the country concerned. There is no need of saying more. Let us turn to the discussion of the Latin-American point of view in elementary courses.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that, as far as elementary courses are concerned, *to teach Spanish* is the first concern of every teacher. But that is no easy task. There is no substance in the world so impervious to the introduction of foreign matter as the head of a young American. It may be added that in many schools the task of teaching Spanish is even harder than that of teaching French and German, although that is saying a good deal. Teachers of French and German, however much they may insist on oral work, really cannot do much more than teach their students to read. They cannot hope to teach many of them to talk. In Spanish this latter aim is possible of achievement. It is possible partly because of the fact that Spanish is not as difficult as the other two languages, its pronunciation being easier than that of French, its syntax being easier than that of German; it is possible also because there is a sub-conscious feeling on the part of students that to talk Spanish will be of practical value, and this makes all the difference in the world. In short, the possibility of teaching their students to talk has led most teachers of Spanish to aim at that end, and thus the easiest language has become the hardest. It is therefore all the more obvious that there is no opportunity in an elementary Spanish class-room for anything in the nature of an extra demand on time and energy.

It is out of the question, then, to try to make our elementary courses do what should be done by special courses in Latin-American geography or history. We could not do that without becoming poor teachers of Spanish. Nevertheless, we can do something along those lines. Every modern language teacher knows that his teaching is made more effective by connecting it, however tenuously, with the country of the language taught. It makes the study seem real to the student. It gives him enthusiasm, and thus success is half won. We Spanish teachers have long been connecting our teaching with the 'cosas de España'. It has not been a hindrance, but a help. We could teach just as much about the 'cosas de la América latina' without subtracting a bit from our efficiency as teachers of language. The heroes and heroines of our grammatical exercises and composition books, those eternal Johns and Marys, and their sisters and their cousins and their aunts, have long been visiting Madrid and crossing the Puerta del Sol. Why should they not, instead, visit Santiago de Chile, and walk up and down the Alameda? They have talked long enough of Alfonso Trece, why should they not talk instead of Bolívar and San Martín? Our students have been translating into Spanish: "Madrid has 500,000 inhabitants, and is the capital of Spain." It would take no more of their time and energy to translate: "Buenos Aires has 1,500,000 inhabitants, and is the fourth city in this hemisphere." They could base their classroom conversation on articles dealing with Latin-American scenery and customs, on selections from Latin-American historians, on such typically Latin-American stories as *María* or *Amalia* just as well as on *El Capitán Veneno* or *Marianela*. Thus, at the end of their elementary training, they would know, without any extra expenditure of effort, a few important things in regard to Latin America. They would be able to locate and bound the various Latin-American countries, and to name their capitals and important sea-ports; they would know such elemental facts as that Brazil is the country of coffee and Chile of nitrate; they would be familiar with the leading figures of Latin-American history; they would be acquainted with a few of the striking peculiarities of the Latin-American countries, such as *llamas* in Peru, *gauchos* in Argentina, and *mate* in Paraguay. The sum of all they would know would not be impressive. We could not

give them a fundamental understanding of the *culture* of Latin-America. But we could give them what might be called Latin-American *local color*.

As far as elementary courses are concerned, then, to teach from the Latin-American point of view means the introduction into the class-room of Latin-American local color.

As has been pointed out above, the teaching of advanced courses in Latin-American literature in our colleges would be of value for the Latin-American point of view. But very few, comparatively, of our boys and girls will ever get as far as such courses. It is clear that the appeal of the Pan American Congress must be met, if it is to be met at all, in our elementary courses. It is therefore very important for us to consider whether the introduction of Latin-American local color into our elementary courses would constitute, in itself alone, an effective response to the appeal of the Congress.

At first sight, it seems as if the imparting of so little knowledge of Latin-America would hardly be worth while. Under ordinary conditions it would not be. But it happens that there is in this country a nascent curiosity in regard to the other nations of this hemisphere. If this curiosity be fed in elementary class-rooms, it will become a strong and greedy monster, walking about, seeking what it may devour. It is very likely—indeed, experience shows it to be certain—that boys and girls who learn a little about Latin-America in their Spanish classes, are anxious to learn a great deal more outside. They read Latin-American items in the newspapers; they read magazine articles and books on Latin-America. And so, when they become men and women, they will be able to take part in forming the public opinion favorable to Latin-America which the country needs. Elementary Latin-American Spanish would, then, in itself alone, constitute an effective response to the appeal of the Pan American Congress. It would meet our national need.

There is, of course, an obvious objection to all this. The Latin-American point of view, if adopted, would displace to a very great extent the Castilian point of view. In elementary courses, Spain would at best have to share with twenty other countries the small amount of time which teacher and students could give to what we have called local color. After the first taste of Latin-America,

moreover, it is certain that students, and perhaps even teachers, would chafe at the use of Castilian readers, or of even one Castilian reader during the course. It is also certain that a majority of college students would choose Latin-American, rather than Castilian advanced courses. All this would be inevitable.

Let us consider, however, just what our students would lose if they lost the Castilian point of view. It would not be love of Castilian literature, for they do not acquire that now. As has been explained above, there is no time in elementary classes for the introduction of anything except a few geographical and historical facts, the things which constitute local color. But whereas the introduction of Latin-American local color into the elementary class-room is important because of its after-effects, Castilian local color has at best only a temporary value. It cannot play the role of a little matter kindling a great fire, for the young American is not curious about Spain, and cannot be made so. It may be said, therefore, that our students will lose nothing, as a result of the adoption of the Latin-American point of view, except a few comparatively useless Castilian facts.

Many teachers will say, however, that this is an unfair presentation of the matter. They will say that it is after all worth while to 'expose' the elementary student to Castilian literature, in other words, to let him read a few samples in the hope that he will in some way catch the spirit of the whole. But how many teachers who have tried this method of exposure can honestly say that it has succeeded? Is it not the truth that you cannot really appreciate the literature of a language until you know how to speak it? Perhaps the failure of modern language teachers in general to realize this, is at the bottom of many of our disappointments. We often are fain to believe that young Americans not only will not, but cannot, appreciate foreign literatures. Perhaps their lack of enthusiasm is due merely to the fact that they have not yet sufficiently mastered the language. It is pretty hard to be enthusiastic about a story which you read at a snail's pace, in two-page assignments, with much fingering of vocabularies and explaining of subjunctives. It is certain that students, if not teachers, will agree to the assertion that the Latin-American point of view will not deprive them of the chance to gain an

appreciation of Castilian literature in elementary courses, for the simple reason that they have never had a chance.

As to advanced courses, it should be remembered that most of those teachers who are in favor of responding to the appeal of the Pan American Congress, are at the same time in favor of retaining, in our colleges, the same advanced courses in Castilian literature which are given now. They are not trying, therefore, to exclude Spain from this hemisphere altogether. They are not proposing a Monroe Doctrine in Spanish teaching. But more than this may be said. It is possible that many of those students who do complete an elementary course taught from the Latin-American point of view will have acquired an enthusiasm for the language itself which will make them anxious to read the very best literature which the language offers. In that case, the advanced Castilian courses in colleges will have more takers than at present, and thus the amount of Castilian literature appreciated in this country will actually be increased, rather than decreased. What we shall lose in Castilian local color, we may gain in Castilian culture. Even the Latin-American cloud may have a silver lining.

In the foregoing pages the writer has presented his own method of teaching Spanish from the Latin-American point of view. There must, of course, be other ways of doing it. After all, it does not matter how the appeal of the Pan American Congress is answered, if only it is answered. It is the duty of every teacher of Spanish in this country, his duty as an American citizen, to find *some* way of teaching from the Latin-American point of view.

Yale University.

FREDERICK BLISS LUQUIENS.